

VZCZCXRO4520
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHKU #0489/01 0941405
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 041405Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8699
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000489

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/03/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [KU](#)
SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: WOMEN'S ACTIVISTS INTENSIFY
EFFORTS TO IMPROVE PERSONAL STATUS LAW AND INCREASE FEMALE
POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

REF: A. KUWAIT 271
[B](#). KUWAIT 174
[C](#). 06 KUWAIT 3939

Classified By: CDA Matthew H. Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary: Recently women's groups have galvanized their efforts to fight the main problems they face: discrimination in Kuwait's personal status law and lack of representation in parliamentary and governmental positions. Female activists rallied to successfully oppose a bill that would have rewarded women for staying home rather than working. Women have also increasingly begun to vocalize their support for a quota of women in parliament. While there is still confusion about the details of a quota, there are signs that women who were either opposed to or apathetic to the issues of a quota have begun to support it. Efforts from outside NGOs have supported the increased activity of women's groups in supporting their issues, but women's groups still suffer internal division. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The past several months have seen a flurry of activity among women's activists and women's advocacy organizations as they try to address the two main women's issues in Kuwait: inequities in personal status law and underrepresentation in parliament and senior governmental positions. The new energy is a welcome sign that a period of relative inactivity after the historic parliamentary elections of 2006, in which women ran and voted for the first time but failed to win, may be coming to an end.

Personal Status Law

[1](#)3. (U) Parliament's Women's Committee approved in early February a bill introduced by a group of Islamist parliamentarians on women's social and civil matters (ref B). The law -- which promised increased social stipends for women and increased time off for maternity and child-rearing -- won the support of Islamist women's groups such as the women's branch of the Social Reform Society (the Muslim Brotherhood's social branch) as well as Islamist women's student groups. Liberal groups criticized the law as a way to buy women's continued political weakness by keeping them out of the workplace.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Prominent journalist and women's activist Aisha Al-Reshaid held a "grilling" session at her diwaniyya on March 20 to highlight the problems in the new law. She invited Salah Ashour, the head of the parliamentary committee on women's affairs, and Abdulwahab Al-Haroun, the previous head of the women's committee (he lost his seat in parliament in 2006). Approximately 40 women, including many of Kuwait's elite liberal leaders attended. Ashour presented the bill's

benefits, arguing that it gave women a choice to stay at home while not obligating them to do so. He also pointed to the fact that the bill rectifies a problem in Kuwaiti law that denies various privileges to Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti men. Al-Reshaid started the barrage of criticism by pointing out how the bill's generous maternity leave and early retirement policies could allow many women to hardly work a day in their life and still draw a government salary. Another woman reacted sharply to Ashour's point that it was better for women to take the 250-Dinar (865 USD) monthly payment to stay home than to waste their time at a government job where they did virtually nothing. The solution, she insisted, was government economic and administrative reform, not paying women for doing nothing. Dr. Fatima Al-Abdali, a former candidate for parliament and one of Kuwait's leading women's activists, pointed out that women needed increased opportunities to take on decision-making roles, not financial incentives to stay out of the work place.

¶5. (SBU) Another prominent critic of the law, Dr. Rola Dashti, pointed out separately to PolOff that women's activists also objected in principle to a separate law detailing women's rights. They feared that a separate law could eventually be perverted to introduce non-progressive restrictions on women's issues. Dashti pointed out that it would be better to remove the unfair provisions of current laws rather than creating a new law (ref A).

¶6. (SBU) Parliament's Women's Committee announced soon after Al-Reshaid's diwaniyya that the law had been temporarily suspended for further study. During his presentation, MP Ashour clearly showed that he favored passage of the bill. The decision to suspend it strongly suggests that women had effectively mobilized to thwart the

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law.

Women's Political Participation

¶7. (SBU) Few observers predicted that women would win seats during the 2006 elections, the first in which women could participate as voters and candidates. When the results came in, however, it became clear that women candidates were not even close to winning seats. Women's activists began thinking about ways to break into the parliament. Prior to the elections, most women had opposed a quota of seats for women in the parliament, primarily because they feared it would taint female MPs. Three months after the 2006 elections, however, a group of prominent women's activists approached the Amir asking him to implement a quota (ref C).

¶8. (C/NF) Significant opposition to or at least apathy towards quotas persisted until recent weeks, when a growing number of women activists have begun to support the idea of a quota as the only way to quickly bring women into the parliament. On March 26, for instance, Assistant Under Secretary for Tourism and former parliamentary candidate

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Nabila Al-Anjari, wrote a lengthy piece in the Al-Watan Arabic daily arguing that since men have enjoyed discriminatory advantages for so many years, it was time for women to enjoy legal advantages to help them as well. Kuwait University professor Haila Al-Mekaimi told PolOff on March 7 that she did not have a strong opinion about quotas, though her immediate reaction was that quotas were bad because other groups such as the Shi'a would demand quotas as well. Perhaps as a sign of the growing momentum for a quota, she was quoted in the newspaper several weeks later as favoring a quota.

¶9. (C/NF) Civil society groups, including international NGOs, have played an important role in activating women on this issue. Freedom House, which works in conjunction with

the Women's Cultural and Social Society, has held a series of seminars during the first quarter of the year on personal status law and on increasing women's political participation, both through election of women as well as through women putting increasing pressure on their parliamentarians. The National Democratic Institute (NDI), working with a MEPI grant, has been conducting intensive consultations with the Women's Network, a loose, unlicensed grouping of prominent liberal women's activists, on conducting an advocacy strategy for building support for a quota.

¶10. (SBU) Women's activists are still divided about the particulars of a quota. Some favor reserved seats for women. Others favor the top women vote-getters in each district winning a seat in parliament. Legal observers suggest these measures might require constitutional changes. Another method would be voting lists, with at least one candidate on each list being a woman, and with voters voting for lists rather than individuals. Head of the Parliament's Women's Committee MP Salah Ashour and activist Rola Dashti both prefer this option. Freedom House's in-country director as well as the director of NDI's Kuwait program both told PolOff they would bring in election systems experts to clarify the options to some of the key women's activists.

Challenges

¶11. (SBU) Women in Kuwait still face significant legal discrimination as well as cultural hurdles to their professional and political advancement. Unfortunately, women's groups here are deeply divided. Some of the divisions are issues-based, such as the divisions between the Islamists and the liberals. But many of the divisions represent personality conflicts between the leaders of like-minded groups. The fight over women's voting rights was unifying enough to allow the groups to work together, but they are once again diluting their efforts through lack of unity. Recently, women seem to have re-energized themselves and may be better-positioned to find common ground.

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